

Chemetco plant demolition starts

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A "sordid chapter" in the history of Madison County may be closer to its end with the cleanup of the former Chemetco plant near Hartford.

Political and business leaders gathered Tuesday near the former copper recycling plant along Route 3 at the invitation of the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency to observe the dismantling of Chemetco's main building, a longstanding eyesore. The building, with its distinctive roof-top manifolds, is expected to be torn down and hauled away by the end of November.

That will clear the path for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to begin removing the huge zinc slag pile and purge the site of lead, cadmium, copper and other pollutants left behind when Chemetco abruptly shut down in November 2001.

The USEPA sealed the site in December 2001 to prevent the public and workers from being harmed by pollutants.

The government designated Chemetco a superfund site in March 2010.

"This sordid chapter of our history will soon be closed in a few years," said state Sen. William Haine, D-Alton. Haine said IEPA officials told him that the the federal cleanup would be completed in three to five years.

State Rep. Dan Beiser, D-Alton, heralded the start of the cleanup.

"It's been a black eye for the community and a constant eyesore and reminder to everyone who drives down Route 3 or Poag Road," Beiser said. "It's going to be a huge boost to the morale of the community, just seeing the buildings down."

A California contractor is tearing down the main production plant and some outbuildings, said Maggie Carson, a spokeswoman for IEPA.

The contractor will also collect materials which can be profitably recycled to help some of the cleanup cost.

No cost estimate was available Tuesday, in part because the amount of pollutants and the area they cover has yet to be determined, Carson said.

Haine was unrestrained in his assessment of Chemetco.

"It's been a disgrace to the entire region from the moment of its unfortunate creation," Haine said. "It had

to be the result of a corrupt and incompetent zoning decision."

Haine, a former Madison County state's attorney who was serving with the Army in Vietnam when Chemetco opened in 1969, said the Madison County Board allowed Chemetco to set up shop in the floodplain, a mile from the Mississippi River.

He said he saw other questionable zoning decisions by the County Board and, as state's attorney, sued to block a toxic waste recycling operation proposed near Granite City.

Haine said Chemetco "became a symbol of pollution and scandalous operation" that showed "why we need environmental regulations and their enforcement."

"I have high praise for the Illinois EPA in staying with this and getting rid of it," he said.

The people who ran Chemetco "ought to have been horsewhipped and sent to prison," Haine said.

Chemetco at one time was the 23rd largest privately held company in the United States with annual revenues of \$500 million. The plant refined scrap copper and manufactured copper anodes, as well as recycling computer parts and other materials.

Chemetco's operation started unraveling when, in 1996, an IEPA inspector found a hidden pipe used to dump water contaminated with lead, cadmium and zinc into Long Lake, which empties into the Mississippi River, and adjacent wetlands. The pipe had been used for 10 years, authorities said.

Chemetco and six employees were charged in federal criminal indictments in 1999.